

An Idea Whose Time Has Come —

Preservation Trades Network

Preservation Trades Network (PTN) is an idea and has the promise to represent many different ideas to many different people. That is the hope and the challenge that PTN faces.

In the mere act of creating PTN, issues came up over the name and the focus of the group. As a result, there are now two groups, PTN and Preservation Industry Network/New York (PIN/NY). One of the first things that any group needs to deal with is determining who are the people it represents and what is the intent of the group. I hope the intent of PTN, PIN, and any other collection of individuals dealing with contracting, suppliers, and trades issues is to create an environment where we, the PTNs or PINs of the world gather, interact, agree, disagree, and ultimately take an active, positive stand for the knowledge and skills represented within our community.

For too long, tradespeople have allowed the concept to persist that there is no validation of knowledge outside of academia. In preservation, we have allowed memorization of bits of information to be certified as understanding, knowledge, and skill. It has gone so far as to allow government agencies to incorporate regulations mandating academic training levels without acknowledging field experience. I find this particularly interesting because our society values academic education and sports stars. The tradespeople that are dedicated to their career combine both the working of the mind with the masterful control of the body.

I have heard individuals in charge of training programs belittle the trades for their lack of interest and response to the efforts that are being made for the trades. This response always reminds me of the housing problem in Pittsburgh as the steel industry was growing. Families from the Appalachian Mountains that had lived a traditional rural mountain lifestyle were flocking to the city for the men to work in the mills. An apartment building was built to house some of the families. The building and the apartments were configured in the standard urban style. A small lobby, narrow stairs and halls, living/dining room, kitchen, two bedrooms, and one bath. In very little time, the building was in a mess. People loitering in the halls and stairs, families sleeping in the living

room while using the bedrooms for storage, pigs and chickens being slaughtered in the bath tubs, and other “inappropriate” behavior. Were these people stupid? Did they not know how to behave like civilized humans? Of course they were not stupid and yes they behaved in very civil ways. It was just that the people that built the building did not understand who the occupants were. They were people with a social tradition of entertaining friends on their porches in nice weather or around the stove in cold weather. The family houses were of mountain vernacular in design, such as Dog-Trot and two-room cabins with full-width front porches. These people were used to feeding themselves from their gardens and livestock. The building was for city dwellers and not rural mountain people. The point here is that people in the trades are letting others make decisions for them and the results have not been pretty.

We need to ask many questions: “Who should determine what value to place on varying years of field experience?” “Who should influence determining the value of academic and vocational programs in relation to field experience?” “Who should have input on pre-qualification criteria?” “Who should be on review panels to determine funding for training programs?” We all have our own areas of interest where we see things that could, and should, be different. Yes, PTN is an idea whose time has come.

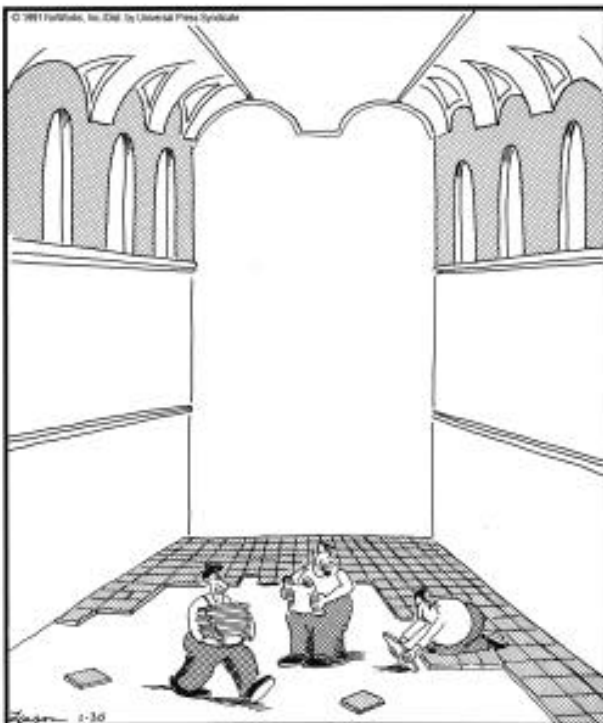
Creating groups that come together to form a community is not going to be easy. The different voices will clash at times, but that is just part of the process. The different voices will also agree at times. Maybe we can have a hands-on and open discussion. Maybe we can look at each others’ work and occasionally say, “that’s real nice, here’s an award.” Maybe we can recognize those among us with the skill and ability in the field and with a knack for training others. We need to position individuals from among our group onto boards, panels, and to author articles.

Who is a tradesperson? Let’s start off with the following definition.

A preservation tradesperson is an individual with an intimate involvement in the understanding and use of labor and materials to produce a product for which they earn a living and create a career identity.

THE FAR SIDE

By GARY LARSON



Although history has long forgotten them, Lambini & Sons are generally credited with the Sistine Chapel floor.

A tradesperson is not the person who labors to round out his/her life (hobby), is not someone who looks at the history of materials and production without the physical interaction (architect, historian), is not the person who purchases a tool and materials along with instructions (a hammer and a pick-up truck does not make a carpenter). The key items here are “earn a living” and “create a career identity.” Someone who has become intimately involved in learning to produce a product as varied as those required within the preservation community must deal with understanding the processes of labor and experience the qualities of materials. They need to recognize the evolution of techniques and materials. They need to learn from the generations of workers that have gone before them. They need to observe and analyze the work of others so that they may pick up the lessons that have been set before them. They need to “earn the identity” of being a person that is a professional in his/her field. This identity is first bestowed on the individual by the individual themselves and then can be acknowledged by others.

The recognition by others is an important process. It is very important when that recognition is from peers. Recognition from some sources can actually be detrimental. I remember visiting a woodworker's shop that was located in a “craft complex”

at a historic site. The “craft” buying public ooh'd and aah'd over products of questionable skill, causing the workers to be happy with their quality of work and to believe that they worked at a master's level of skill and knowledge.

What do we need to do to bring about the changes that are needed? We do this by realizing that it takes a commitment from many people. Many people leveraging a little time and effort can do amazing things. Breakfast meetings, lunch meetings, site visits, after work gatherings, demonstrations, make an effort to meet with others and find out what are the common issues. Realize that no matter what is tried, it will not work for everyone. Just get things started; do not try to be perfect.

Will being a member of the Preservation Trade Network make a difference? Hopefully it will, but only time will tell. What should PTN set as its first goals? PTN has the support of the Association for Preservation Technology. It has planned the first International Preservation Trades Workshop (IPTW)—a conference/training/organizational event by and for the preservation trade community. PTN has a long list of cooperating groups helping with the IPTW. Those involved in PTN activities have already set in motion efforts to get more trade-related representation on boards and panels. This issue of the CRM is allowing more trade-related individuals to express their views in articles. More people involved in more activities are needed to develop more momentum. The basic goal of developing a stronger voice for the preservation trades community is happening. To make some real advances, each trades-related person should have access to the Internet and establish an email address. This will allow information to flow back and forth without the high costs and time consuming process of printing and mailing. The Internet can not only provide access to information on products and materials, but also makes it possible to ask questions of people whether they are next door or on the other side of the world. We now have the ability to form a community without the cost of long-distance calls or the time and expense of travel. The Internet is a very useful tool and should be used. Currently, there is a PTN website at <http://www.prginc.com/ptn-index/>. If you have information to be included, please send it by email to the website or mail it to PTN, P. O. Box 1815, Rockville, MD 20849-1815.

J. Bryan Blundell is President of the Dell Corporation, a preservation specialties contractor, Rockville, Maryland, and Preservation Trades Network (PTN) Liaison to the Association for Preservation Technology International (APTI) Board of Directors

THE FAR SIDE © 1991 FARWORKS, INC Used by permission of UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE. All rights reserved.